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UNCLAS VATICAN 004205

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT. FOR EUR/WE-LEVIN; EUR/OHI (BRAUM); NEA/IAI; EUR/RPM

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KIRF](#) [IS](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: VATICAN, SANT'EGIDIO PROMOTE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

REF: A) Vatican 3581; B) Vatican 3070; C) Vatican 1471; D) Vatican 1302

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) The Holy See and the Vatican-affiliated lay community Sant'Egidio are actively promoting Christian-Jewish dialogue and initiatives to combat anti-Semitism. In October, delegations from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews met near Rome and issued a joint statement emphasizing their partnership and the sacred character of Jerusalem. With Vatican support, the Pontifical Gregorian University is supplementing its already robust course offerings on Judaism and religious dialogue with an evening lecture series open to the public on Christian-Jewish relations. Sant'Egidio held what has become an annual march commemorating the expulsion of the Jews from Rome during WWII, and continues to promote inter-religious reconciliation in other venues, often including Muslims. The significant overlap between the goals of these initiatives and the USG's anti-Semitism and religious-tolerance goals offer opportunities for expanded collaboration with the Holy See and Sant'Egidio. End Summary.

Vatican, Jewish Delegations Meet for Dialogue

2. (U) Delegations from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, led by Rabbi Shar Yishuv Cohen, and the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, headed by Cardinal Jorge Mejia, met for three days of meetings and dialogue October 17-19 near Rome. Participants discussed "A Common Vision of Social Justice and Ethical Behavior" as part of an ongoing program established in 2002 between Catholic and Jewish authorities to find common ground on issues of mutual concern. This year's session coincided with the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.

Catholics, Jews are "Unequivocal Partners"

3. (U) In a joint statement released after the conference (complete text emailed to EUR/WE and EUR/OHI) delegates said there was insufficient awareness in the Catholic and Jewish communities of "the momentous change" that has taken place in the relationship between the two peoples. "We are not enemies," the statement continued, "but unequivocal partners in articulating the essential moral values for the survival and welfare of human society."

4. (U) The delegations also appealed for respect for Jerusalem's sacred character, as well as for the various religious communities in the Holy City. The document encouraged religious authorities to "protest publicly when actions of disrespect towards religious persons, symbols and Holy Sites are committed." The six Catholic and six Jewish participants specifically mentioned the desecration of Jewish graves and an October 10 incident in which an ultra-Orthodox Jewish student spat at a cross carried by Armenian Orthodox Archbishop Nourhan Manougian during a religious procession in Jerusalem's Old City.

Vatican Emphasizes Common Roots

5. (U) In statements on Vatican Radio, Fr. Norbert Hofmann, Secretary of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and a 2004 Embassy Vatican IVP recipient, said that in the wake of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, Catholics are discovering the Jewish roots of their faith. "Jesus was Jewish, the Mother of God was Jewish, the apostles were Jews," he said. "Christianity

has Jewish roots and we are increasingly rediscovering what we have in common."

Pontifical University Focuses on Judaism

16. (U) The Holy See's academic arms are also promoting dialogue with Judaism. The Gregorian Pontifical University offers several courses on Jewish thought and relations in conjunction with the Cardinal Bea Center for Judaic Studies. The Center was formally founded in 2001, but has origins dating to 1978. This year, the Gregorian is offering a feature course open to all Roman universities and to the public on the Catholic Church and Judaism "from Vatican II to today." In the first lecture -- held in conjunction with the Chief Rabbinate delegation's visit -- German Cardinal Walter Kasper and Rome's Chief Rabbi, Riccardo Di Segni, analyzed the present state of Jewish-Catholic dialogue. With Israel's Ambassador to the Holy See in attendance, both sides discussed challenges in relations, but concluded that significant progress had been made in recent years. Rabbi Di Segni noted that involvement of the Orthodox rabbinical world in official dialogue with the Catholic Church "would have been unthinkable only a few years ago." Now it is a reality.

Further Holocaust Education a Possibility

17. (SBU) Topics to be addressed by scholars and leading churchmen during the course include the "sometimes tragic" story of Christian-Jewish relations before Vatican II, the effect of the Holocaust on inter-religious dialogue, and the state of Holy See-Israel relations. Visiting EUR/OHI Deputy Director Don Braum discussed with Fr. Hofmann the possibility of a similar course or series of lectures focused exclusively on the Holocaust. Though Hofmann is not on the permanent staff at the Gregorian, he thought the proposal would appeal to the directors of the program and to the Bea Center.

Vatican Optimistic

18. (SBU) Hofmann was optimistic about Jewish-Catholic relations, citing a conference in Buenos Aires in July at which Catholic and Jewish participants performed community service projects together. He said he was looking forward to an Anti-Defamation League meeting on anti-Semitism in Rome in December, and the next OSCE conference on the topic, to be held in Cordoba, Spain in 2005. Braum briefed Hofmann on the activities of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, and raised the possibility of further opening the Vatican's archives for the period concerning the Holocaust.

Sant'Egidio Deeply Involved

19. (SBU) Braum also exchanged views with officials from the Vatican-affiliated Catholic lay organization Sant'Egidio on anti-Semitism and Holocaust education. In addition to Sant'Egidio's annual peace conferences (ref a) that regularly feature panels on Jewish-Christian and Jewish-Muslim dialogue, the group sponsors a separate Jewish-Christian Dialogue Series that draws leaders from both traditions. The next such event will be held in December or January. Sant'Egidio also incorporates its message of understanding into its work with the poor and immigrants in Rome. Sant'Egidio's officials told Braum and Poloff that a segment on Holocaust education has been introduced to its free Italian language classes for recent immigrants, many of whom are Muslim.

Holocaust Remembrance March

10. (U) Sant'Egidio organizes an annual march commemorating the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by the Nazis in 1943. This year's event brought together the Catholic and Jewish communities, and included Muslim participants. Several hundred people met at Sant'Egidio's headquarters and, holding candles and carrying signs with the names of Nazi concentration camps, marched to Rome's Synagogue where they met members of the city's Jewish community. Sant'Egidio founder Andrea Riccardi, along with Rabbi Di Segni and other Jewish leaders, spoke of the need to recall the horror of the deportation and to pass on its

lessons "from generation to generation." Members of Rome's Muslim community, including some recent Palestinian immigrants, also attended. The event attracted considerable public attention, winding through the busy Rome streets on a Saturday night. Sant'Egidio representatives told us that each of its chapters worldwide (there are 40,000 members in some 60 countries) now holds an annual event to remember Holocaust victims.

Comment

11. (SBU) The Holy See's and Sant'Egidio's expanding focus on Christian-Jewish dialogue, while not new for either, reflects each group's desire to combat signs of rising anti-Semitism and continue the positive evolution in religious dialogue since Vatican II in the 1960's. Pope John Paul II has built on Vatican II-era breakthroughs in relations to forge new ties with Jews. Using the Pope's focus on inter-religious dialogue of all types as a model, Sant'Egidio has been extremely successful in bringing Jews, Christians and Muslims together in dialogue. With significant overlap between the goals of these initiatives and those of the USG, meaningful opportunities exist for collaboration with the Vatican and Sant'Egidio, including in the promotion of Holocaust education, increased attention to the root causes of the new anti-Semitism in Europe, and encouragement of the Vatican to open up more of its Holocaust-era archives to scholars.

Nicholson